

Persecution Spreads the Gospel

Key Text:	Acts 7:30-60 & 8
Key Verse(s):	“And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:59-60)

Background to the Study

The charges brought against Stephen are relayed in Acts 6:11, 13-14. Firstly, his accusers claimed that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses and the Law, and tried to change Jewish customs. Secondly, they asserted that he spoke blasphemous words against God and God’s dwelling place, the Temple. Stephen had begun his defence before the council by giving a historical account of God’s dealings with the Jewish people through events in the lives of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. The chapter ends with the irate response of his hearers, and Stephen’s martyrdom by stoning (vs. 54-60). Throughout Stephen’s speech, he repeatedly alluded to Israel’s continual rebellion and idolatry despite the mighty works of God which they had seen, thus condemning them through their own history. In verses 42-43, Stephen asserted that Israel’s rejection of Moses had led to false worship and breaking of the Law, so God “gave them up” to their worship of the host of heaven (the sun, moon, and stars) and their gods Molech (associated with child sacrifice) and Remphan (an Egyptian god). While the Jews insisted that the Temple at Jerusalem was the only place where the Divine Presence was manifested, Stephen asserted that neither the Temple nor the Tabernacle were intended to be the place where God permanently dwelt. In verse 51, Stephen’s tone abruptly shifts to that of a prosecutor. His charge that his hearers were “stiffnecked” was a description that had been applied to the Jews by God himself (Exodus 33:5). The members of the Sanhedrin responded to Stephen’s reproof with vehement anger. Stephen finished his life by committing his soul to the Lord and devoutly praying for his persecutors.

Chapter 8 of Acts can be divided into three parts. Verses 1-4 cover the dispersion of the Jewish believers into the regions of Judea and Samaria due to persecution, and the resultant expansion of the Church. The ministry of the evangelist Philip in Samaria is described in verses 5-25, and the remainder of the chapter recounts Philip’s meeting with and instruction of the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert of Gaza. According to verse 4, one endeavour common to the followers of Christ who were scattered abroad by persecution was that they “went everywhere preaching the word.” While Philip’s preaching brought “great joy” in the city of Samaria, the account of the false magician, Simon, in verses 9-24, reveals that not all continued in the faith. While Simon did believe (vs. 13), his commitment was only temporary. The fact that the Apostles prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Ghost (vs. 15) indicates that this experience of a personal Pentecost was considered a vital part of the

believers' spiritual walks. In the midst of a successful revival, Philip was called by God to a new task: he was to "arise, and go" to Gaza (vs. 26). The eunuch Philip met was from Ethiopia, a kingdom on the Nile which was located between Aswan, in modern-day Egypt and Khartoum in Sudan, rather than the country identified today as Ethiopia, which is further south. The passage the eunuch was reading aloud from the Scripture was Isaiah 53:7-8. His question of whom the prophet spoke of gave Philip a perfect opportunity to present Jesus, and eventually culminated in the eunuch's profession of faith in Christ.

Testimony from Our Day

The power of God to put a forgiving spirit in the human heart is wonderfully exemplified in the life story of Jim, an ex-convict known for many years as "Forty-five"—a man who spent twenty-five years in prison at hard labour for a crime he did not commit. At the age of sixteen, Forty-five left his home in Rhode Island and headed west. One night he rode into the city of Tacoma, Washington, in a boxcar, reaching there just when a murder had been committed. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labour. In the penitentiary, Forty-five suffered all the severity of punishment issued out to desperate criminals in those days, including solitary confinement, rations of bread and water, being shackled by a ball and chain, and thirty lashes at a whipping post. Upon his release, Forty-five was nearly wrecked in body and mind, homeless, and friendless. He took a train to Portland, Oregon, where he wandered the streets for four days looking for work, with nothing to eat and no place to sleep except the lumber piles. At last, he went onto the Burnside Bridge intending to jump into the Willamette River. Just as he climbed up on the railing, a bridge keeper came rushing to him and pulled him down. As Forty-five walked away, he noticed the large lighted sign on the Apostolic Faith Church a short distance away. An unseen power seemed to compel him to attend a service there. At the close of the meeting, Forty-five went to the altar, prayed, and God saved him. About two years later, as he was testifying in a service about his experiences and conversion, a man sat listening in the back of the church with tears flowing down his cheeks. Someone who talked with the man later told Forty-five that this stranger knew something about him. After tracing the man to San Francisco, California, Forty-five learned that he was dying of tuberculosis in a hospital there. Forty-five took a job in the hospital and had an opportunity to converse with the stranger. One night the sick man asked to have the Bible read to him, so Forty-five read aloud the story of the Prodigal Son. Then the man looked at Forty-five and asked, "Can you ever forgive me for the wrong I have done you?" Brokenly, he confessed that he was the man who committed the murder that had sent Forty-five to prison. Forty-five's thoughts immediately went to the long years he had spent in confinement and all that he had suffered. Could he forgive? He left the sick man and went into a little room where he could be alone. Kneeling down, he prayed and wrestled with God for nearly three hours, asking God to put a real spirit of forgiveness in his heart. At last he went back to the sick man's room and took the dying man in his arms. He said, "I forgive you for all the injuries you have done me, but you will also have to ask God to forgive you." The man began to cry out, over and over, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" God heard that broken plea and saved his soul. Three days later the man died, but because of Forty-five's witness, he is spending eternity with the Lord. Forty-five's forgiveness of one who had caused him to suffer so terribly could only come from God. We see the same merciful spirit exemplified by Stephen, when he prayed the words of our key verse, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," as the stones were pummeling his body. Though most of us will never suffer as Forty-five and Stephen did, there may have been events in our lives that were hard, that were wrong, that have deeply wounded us and are difficult to forgive. We can have the same freedom from bitterness and revenge that was in the hearts of Forty-five and Stephen.

A Closer Look

Question 1	Stephen was charged with speaking blasphemous words against God and the Temple, and attempting to change Jewish customs. Chapter 7 records his defense before the Sanhedrin. In verse 52, whom did he accuse his hearers of murdering? Why do you think Stephen could so fearlessly address the council, even though he must have known his life was in danger for doing so?
Question 2	The cost for proclaiming the Gospel in the first century was civil, social, and physical persecution. What is the potential cost in your circumstances?
Question 3	According to Acts 8:5-8, Philip's ministry to the people of Samaria had been blessed by God. Many afflicted individuals had been healed, and there was great joy in the city. Yet, God instructed this successful evangelist to go to a lonely road in the middle of a desert to witness to one man (verse 26). What spiritual lessons can we learn from this incident?
Question 4	After Simon saw the Holy Ghost being poured out through the laying on of hands by Peter and John, he attempted to pay money to obtain the same power. According to Acts 8:20-23, how did Peter respond?
Question 5	In today's text, persecution led to a good result—the spread of the Gospel. What are some of the blessings and positive results that God has accomplished in your life through times of trial or adversity?

Take Home

The grace to forgive can be ours when we remember how much we have been forgiven. God cares about each individual soul and will go to amazing lengths to draw hungry hearts to Himself and ensure that they receive the instruction they need. God clearly arranged the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian, and this event provides us with a beautiful example of how God opens doors for evangelism. Are we doing our parts to step through the open doors God places in our paths? Be alert to the opportunities for evangelism that God places before you. Follow God's leading!